

Writing Handout L-10

Analyzing Film & Television

Overview

While some students may feel that watching a movie is easier than reading a book or play, film analysis requires paying active attention to critical cinematic techniques in order to create a proper interpretation of the work. Along with plot, character, and dialog, students will examine the elements unique to movies and television, such as camerawork, special effects, sound, and any other method the film uses to engage the viewer.

The General Process

- 1. Examine the title:** Is it serious, explanatory, humorous, or sarcastic? Does it directly reference the movie's subject (*Lincoln* or *The Maltese Falcon*), or is it thematic (*Moonlighting* or *The Hurt Locker*)? For a television series, do the episode titles follow any set patterns?
- 2. Watch the movie:** Keep notes and time stamps for key scenes in case you need to see them again. Which characters does the movie sympathize with? What are the key settings and objects? If this is a historical work, are the technology and dialog appropriate for the times?
- 3. Examine the direction:** What scope of time does the movie cover? One day or a lifetime? How fast is the pacing? Is the movie more interested in big dramatic events or the characters' personal lives? How does it depict the characters and their world?
- 4. Determine the tone:** Does the tone alternate between drama and comedy? What lighting and camera choices (known as cinematography) are made? Is the worldview positive, hopeful, grim, or sarcastic?
- 5. Study the ending:** What happens to the characters? How definitive is the conclusion? What is the final shot of the movie? Are there any meaningful unanswered questions?

Analyzing Camera, Lighting, and Special Effects

The primary difference between film and novels is the use of audio and visuals to tell the story rather than narration and description. The audience only sees what the director wants them to see. Consider commenting on these elements when critiquing a film:

Camera: Directors have the ability to position the camera in ways to convey tone and guide the viewers' attention. For example, shooting an actor from underneath can make him seem tall and imposing, while recording him from far away can make him feel isolated and insignificant. The duration of each shot also affects mood: Frequent camera cuts create a frantic pacing, while a longer shot invites the viewer to focus on tension and emotion.

Lighting: A movie's color scheme is important in establishing tone, and its application goes back to the use of shadows to heighten suspense in the black-and-white *noir* detective movies of the 1920s. Today's films can be steeped in the greyish hues of war, neon pastels, and bright optics of children's films. A notable example is 1999's *The Matrix*, which used a green color scheme to depict the movie's simulated reality.

Special Effects: These techniques can be practical (explosions, props, and animatronics) or digital (Computer-Generated Imagery added after filming). Most productions will still have the person who voices a CGI character emote and interacts with other actors to improve authenticity. While poor digital effects can be distracting, their quality will probably not be relevant to the analysis.

Placing Credit

Film is different from books in that they are collaborative works where many people influence the final result. These collaborations include:

- the director, who leads filming and guides the actors,
- the writer, who drafts the initial screenplay (often using formatting found in *The Screenwriter's Bible*); this screenplay is subject to additional rewrites by the director or “script doctors”,
- the producers and executives, who are involved in staffing, budgeting, and creative decisions,
- the cinematographer, who guides physical camera and lighting decisions,
- the film editor, who splices scenes together after filming in a process called post-production,
- the specialists such as the composer, music/action choreographer, and digital effects team, and
- the actors who influence the tone through their performance and line delivery.

Adaptation and Historical Accuracy

Many movies are based on existing books or plays. Inevitably, there will be differences between the two because of time and budget restrictions as well as choices made by the film’s creative team. Faithfulness to the source material is not necessarily an indicator of the adaptation’s quality: Movies like *The Shining* received many accolades despite significant changes that the original writers did not create.

Other films are inspired by true events — with historical accuracy varying wildly from film to film. When writing about these movies, keep track of how the movie deviates from original accounts, such as excluding key events, downplaying social issues, or simplifying real people so that they could be used as movie villains. Some historical movies may also have “propaganda” elements that promote a specific movement by praising certain leaders or creating an idealized vision of society. In addition, some historical movies may emphasize symbols of power, such as massive crowds and weapons. Finally, some historical movies may present a biased political agenda by demonizing political enemies. It is part of the critical analysis process to be able to identify these elements.

Writing the Analysis

1. Draft a clear introduction of the work. Mention the title and key people that you will discuss in depth. Include a precise thesis statement that forms the “point” of the essay.
2. Move point by point through the paper, making certain that each paragraph has a topic sentence that the rest of the sentences support.
3. Write a conclusion that ties the paper together and re-emphasizes the thesis statement.

Citation Examples

Note: For expanded and up-to-date citation examples please refer to the IRSC Libraries website.

MLA Style

Material	In-text Citation	Works Cited
Movie	(Director's Last Name)	<i>Title</i> . Directed by [Last Name, First Name], performance by [Lead Actor First Name Last Name], Production Company, Year of Release.
	(Scott)	<i>Alien</i> . Directed by Ridley Scott, performance by Sigourney Weaver, Twentieth Century Fox, 1979.
TV Episode	("Shortened Episode Title")	"Episode Title." <i>Series</i> , directed by [Last Name, First Name], performance by [Lead Actor First Name Last Name], season #, episode #, Original Station, Original Air Date [Day Month Year].
	("Something")	"Something Nice Back Home." <i>Lost</i> , directed by Stephen Williams, performance by Matthew Fox, season 4, episode 10, American Broadcasting, 1 May 2008.
Web Video	("Shortened Video Title")	"Video Title." <i>Website</i> , uploaded by [content creator], Upload Date [Day Mo. Year], Link to Website.
	("A Long-Expected Autopsy")	"The Hobbit: A Long-Expected Autopsy (Part 1/2)." <i>YouTube</i> , uploaded by Lindsay Ellis, 2 Mar. 2018, www.youtube.com/watch?v=uTRUQ-RKfUs .

APA Style

Material	In-text Citation	Works Cited
Movie	(Director's Last Name, Year)	Last Name, F.M. (Producer), & Last Name, F.M. (Director). <i>Title</i> [Motion picture]. Country of Origin: Studio or Distributor
	(Scott, 1979)	Carrol, G. (Producer), & Scott, R. (Director) <i>Alien</i> [Motion Picture]. Directed by Ridley Scott. United Kingdom & United States. Twentieth Century Fox, 1979.
TV Episode	(Director's Last Name, Year)	Last Name, F.M. (Writer), & Last Name, F.M. (Director). (Year of Airing). Episode title [Television series episode]. In F.M. Last Name (Producer), <i>Series title</i> . City, ST of origin: Studio or Distributor.
	(Williams, 2008)	Kitsis, E. & Horowitz, A. (Writers), & Williams, S. (Director). (2008). Something nice back home [Television series episode]. In J.J. Abrams (Producer), <i>Lost</i> . Oahu, Hawaii: Bad Robot.
Web Video	(Director's Last Name, Year)	Last Name, F. M. (Year). Video title [Video file]. Retrieved from URL
	(Ellis, 2017)	Ellis, L. (2018). The hobbit: a long-expected autopsy (part 1/2) [Video file]. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uTRUQ-RKfUs .

Consulted Sources

A History of Narrative Film (4th ed.)

<https://writingcenter.unc.edu/tips-and-tools/film-analysis/>